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Cool Nothing: Dom Sylvester Houédard's Coexistentialist Concrete Poetics

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Abstract:	<p>This article concerns the concrete poetics of Dom Sylvester Houédard, which I define using a term from his 1963 article 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay', 'coexistentialist'. Houédard's concrete poetry has sometimes been criticised for an anachronistic avant-garde quality, because of its non-semantic use of written language, and its associated air of intermedia experiment. But the term 'coexistentialist' has various connotations which allow us to interpret Houédard's work as highly responsive to its cultural moment, and to the unique theological tradition from which it emerged. These connotations include: the relationship between early and mid-twentieth-century modern art and literature; existentialist philosophy, especially the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre; Marshall McLuhan's theories on modern communication; and ecumenical dialogue within the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council. After presenting an outline of Houédard's poetics related to these themes, I analyse some of his concrete poems or 'typestracts', produced between 1967 and 1972.</p>
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Cool Nothing: Dom Sylvester Houédard's Coexistentialist Concrete Poetics

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Biographical Note: Greg Thomas is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, undertaking a three-year research project (2014-17) entitled ‘Judgements and Sentences: Politics in the Life and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay’. He has published book chapters and articles on subjects including concrete poetry and architecture (in *Spatial Perspectives: Essays on Literature and Architecture* [2015]), the Scottish sixties (*Studies in Scottish Literature* 40 [2014]), Bob Cobbing (*Journal of Innovative British and Irish Poetry* 4.2 [2012]) and Edwin Morgan (*Studies in Scottish Literature* [2012]). He is currently working on a book manuscript on concrete poetry in Britain.

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Cool Nothing: Dom Sylvester Houédard's Coexistentialist Concrete Poetics

In 1963 Dom Sylvester Houédard published the article 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay' in Herbert Spencer's journal *Typographica*, the first account published in the UK of what had become known as concrete poetry, a kind of poetry in which, simply put, the visual or material elements of language were central to meaning. Finlay, the article's nominal subject, became disillusioned with the interpretation of concrete poetry, and of his work in particular, which it seemed to represent, describing it curtly in a 1970 biographical note as 'less useful' than other accounts (qtd in 'FINLAY, Ian Hamilton', 369).ⁱ The reason was perhaps that Finlay always held concrete poetry to be a fundamentally linguistic art, augmented by visual and phonetic devices which served as indications of syntax, or to enhance or modify a central theme, but always oriented around a nucleus of meaning provided by words. Houédard presented another idea of concrete poetry, more in tune with the artistic spirit of the decade if more removed from the aims of the first, Northern-European and Brazilian concrete poets during the mid-1950s. In a spirit exemplary of the experimental generation, he emphasised concrete poetry's capacity to blur and dissolve medium boundaries, bringing the visual and linguistic registers into a kind of relativising co-existence.

As John Sharkey noted in the introduction to his 1971 concrete poetry anthology *Mindplay*, Finlay and Houédard were the two 'seminal personalities' associated with the style in Britain (14). Indeed, Houédard's prolific creative and critical output helped to generate an understanding of concrete poetry that stood in fruitful contrast to Finlay's, and by the close of the 1960s his work was well-known in Britain, and to exponents and critics of concrete poetry worldwide. It would even be possible to argue that by the time Sharkey's anthology appeared, Finlay's sense of what concrete poetry represented had been submerged by a wave of creative and critical activity which redefined it along the lines implied by intermedia art and counter-

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cultural ideology. On these terms, concrete poetry's main value lay in evading the constraints of medium, thereby placing metaphorical or literal pressure on broader systems of authority, control and categorisation.ⁱⁱ But although Houédard was sympathetic to some such set of ideas, his own work cannot be defined on these terms nearly as neatly as Finlay's disapprobation assumed. In any case, across the intervening decades the situation vis-à-vis critical attention has entirely shifted: while Finlay's practice is now celebrated as a striking manifestation of late-modernist literary aesthetics, and for its trenchant response to the ideological tenets of modern art, Houédard's has reverted to something of the status of a niche interest.ⁱⁱⁱ Admittedly, the publication of Nicola Simpson's *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (2013), an engaging and superbly presented collection of critical essays, reminiscences and reproductions, indicates a limited resurgence of interest, in line with the more general critical revaluation of concrete poetry which has taken place over the last five years or so. But in many instances Houédard's work is still written off as an eccentric manifestation of a sixties fascination with phantasmagoria, synaesthesia and new-age spirituality.

That perception is understandable but unfair, or rather, incomplete. As critical interest in concrete poetry continues to grow, it therefore seems worth offering a more nuanced account of Houédard's poetics than has so far appeared, by reference to a word which resurfaces throughout his *Typographica* article. That word is 'coexistentialist', and it is a term in which several layers of meaning can be identified, besides its superficial use to define the co-existence of the visual and linguistic registers already alluded to. In this article I wish to focus on four – some, perhaps all, of which were consciously invoked by Houédard – before turning to some examples of his work in which his coexistentialist poetics is borne out. The first involves the relationship between what might be called the first and second-wave Western avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and the 1950-60s respectively; another involves French

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1 existentialism, especially the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre; a third Marshall McLuhan's 1962
2 text *The Gutenberg Galaxy*; and a fourth the spirit of ecumenism within the Catholic Church
3 which Houédard served as a monk, priest and theologian during the Second Vatican Council
4 of 1962-65.
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9 Before running through these ideas, it is worth defining this idea of merging the visual
10 and linguistic registers a little more precisely. I am associating that quality particularly with
11 Houédard's so-called 'typestracts', although it is identifiable to varying degrees in almost all
12 of his work. Typestracts were made by using the linguistic and diacritical marks of the
13 typewriter to build up precise geometrical constructions, generally set in an implied three-
14 dimensional void, sometimes with more fluid or dispersed visual elements floating or
15 swimming around a central edifice. Language and image co-exist in a simple sense because we
16 are presented with a visual image made from pieces of language, using a tool for writing, which
17 thus retains, besides its visible form, what Edwin Morgan calls a 'lingering literary hookup'
18 (1975, 729).^{iv} More subtly, one might say that the visual and linguistic co-exist because the
19 work exists outside conventional symbolic frameworks, avoiding obvious identification as
20 either visual art or language, but potentially identifiable as either or both, that identification to
21 be determined by the reader or viewer rather than pre-emptively controlled by the poet.
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41 In short, the typestracts are works which we might see as using linguistic marks to make
42 visual art, or as occupying a space between or beyond language and image. These are, of course,
43 qualities associable with a raft of visual-linguistic experiments conducted by poets and artists
44 across the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, most famously the Dadaists and
45 Futurists. However, to return to the four affinities mentioned above, the term 'coexistentialist'
46 refers as much to the spirit in which this merging of registers was undertaken as to the process
47 itself, a spirit particular to both the cultural epoch and the theological tradition from which
48 Houédard's work emerged.
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1 His *Typographica* article had, for example, pointedly distinguished between the
2 ‘coexistentialist’ modern art and literature produced since World War Two and that which
3 came before it, especially between the Salon des Refusés exhibition of 1863 and World War
4 One, which Houédard describes as ‘constrictive’ or ‘constructive’. The crux of this distinction
5 is between what he calls ‘the largely pre-WW/1 move to the authentic and non-mimetic’ and
6 the ‘largely post-WW/2 overspill to ... mutual interpretation, rejection of divides & borders,
7 delight in accepting ambiguity/ambivalence: alive blurring of frontiers between art & art, mind
8 & mind, world & world, mind art & world’ (1963, 47). Artworks of construction and
9 constriction, Houédard suggests, were compelled by a kind of urge towards transcendence, the
10 yearning for an expressive or communicative register whose objectivity would be staked on a
11 movement beyond signification. This could be attempted ‘constructively’, by the nominal
12 development of such registers – the quintessential example perhaps being the Zaum language
13 of the Russian Futurists – and/or by ‘constriction’. This involved the destruction or
14 undermining of existing registers to clear space for the new, what Houédard calls ‘the necessary
15 negative anti-past ... épurations [cleansing or purging] of eg the Dadaists’ (47). By contrast,
16 coexistentialism stood for a certain equalisation or levelling out, a combination of expressive
17 registers which accepted and emphasised their mutual non-transcendence or non-objectivity:
18 their containment in symbolic frameworks defined by custom and context rather than mystical
19 affinity with their objects.

20 Houédard associates coexistentialism specifically with concrete poetry, describing its
21 characteristics under the consecutive headings ‘constricting’ and ‘constructive’ before
22 alighting on the third term as if to offer a conclusive definition. In this sense, coexistentialism
23 set concrete poetry apart from earlier avant-garde art and literature by what Houédard called,
24 in his 1964 lecture ‘Eyear’, a ‘sense of zen-peace found in accepting things for the sake of their
25 hollowness’ (n.pag.).^v It is useful, in this sense, to think of the frequent absence of language in

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the typestracks as evidence not of some compulsion towards transcendent expression or communication, but of a withdrawal from that very urge, a certain silent repose which is both ascetic and whimsical. Another of Houédard's terms for concrete poetry, 'Paradada' – the title of a 1964 *Times Literary Supplement* article – confirms this suggestion: concrete as 'beyond' or 'other than' Dada; or, as Houédard put it in that article, 'un-un & cool nothing paradada (surdada) outgrowing sticky fears of inner neant' (Houédard, 1964).

However, the appearance of the Sartrean term 'néant' is also crucial here. In biographical terms, that is, Houédard's coexistentialism represented not so much a movement beyond Dada as beyond a literary and philosophical movement whose title is embedded in the term itself: existentialism. At Sant Anselmo Benedictine College in Rome in the early 1950s, Houédard had completed a licentiate dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre, a process which he later referred to as pivotal to his poetic development.^{vi} Moreover, as a native of the Channel Islands Houédard was bilingual, steeped in a Francophone tradition which encompassed the French existentialist literature of the mid-twentieth century.

Commenting on his dissertation in a 1987 article on Beckett, Houédard remarked that 'Beckett's non-pessimism (say non-non-optimism for greater precision) has here a *place* and *function*, eliminative of what I called in my fifties thesis on *Sartre and Nothingness* the failure of Sartre to (not *revel* in but) feel at home with this Néant *in* which (and *that*) we are' (53). The reference to Sartre is fleeting, but it must be primarily to his major philosophical work *L'Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) (1943). This text defines the mode of being which characterises human consciousness (being-for-itself) as an absence or negation of the pure, undifferentiated being of the inanimate universe (being-in-itself) (Sartre, [1958] 2003). The prerequisite of human consciousness, in other words, is not any essential quality or function but the negation or nihilation of a prior state. This meant, amongst other things, that human consciousness had to be defined as arbitrary or non-necessary: lacking any pre-determining

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purpose. The idea of such a purpose rather emerged through the process by which consciousness perpetually transcended and reflected on itself, by which a sense of the self or ego emerged, and by which meaning was granted in tandem to the external world (ibid.).

For Houédard, the anguish at the core of this existentialist condition was rooted in some sense of an absent alternative, an imaginable yet impossible mode of being which would possess a pre-determined, metaphysically definable quality or function, expressed through a language or sign system which embodied that same truth. In other words, Houédard defined existentialism as constrictive/constructive: characterised by dread at the sheer contingency of human consciousness and its systems of communication. Concrete poetry, by contrast, accepted the ‘néant’ as neutral fact, playfully combining language and image as if to express a cool awareness of the arbitrariness of man-made sign systems, and of the meanings they inscribed on the self and world. Making its home in the néant, concrete poetry redefined the existentialist condition along the same lines as Beckett’s more anguished quest for neutrality: not existentialism, but coexistentialism.

And yet the word contains further layers of significance. In his *Typographica* article Houédard also defined coexistentialism as a necessary condition of ‘[t]he shrinking world: contracted/constricted negatively by bomb & spacefears, positively by jet-communications telstar space-probe. This makes coexistentialism inevitable, international: i.e. all arts merge, barriers crumble, are scrambled’ (1963, 50). This idea of a global society entwined and homogenised by mass communication technology and the pervasive threat of nuclear war – amongst other things – partly takes its cue from the concrete poet Eugen Gomringer’s 1950s manifestos.^{vii} But it also brings to mind the condition of ‘the global village’ identified by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published the year before Houédard’s article ([1962] 1971, 31). Moreover, Houédard’s 1960s critical writing shows a clear awareness and digestion of McLuhan’s terminology.^{viii} This implies another hook-up within the word

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'coexistentialism', linking it to a similar term used in the prologue to McLuhan's text, 'co-existence'. McLuhan's term indicates the potential ability of the modern mind to hold the information and ideas received through different symbolic systems in a kind of sceptical tension.

The Gutenberg Galaxy distinguishes between the 'visual' condition brought about by the development of the phonetic alphabet and the printing press and the 'oral' or 'aural' condition of pre- and non-literate societies. In short, the former is defined by the perception of reality as ordered three-dimensional space, pursuit of linear causal links between objects and events, and the endowment of the individual with rational power and self-awareness. In oral cultures, three-dimensional space is not recognised in the same way, thought is formed in passive, emotionally configured response to external stimuli, and the individual does not recognise themselves so discretely from the social mass. McLuhan famously prophesied that the advent of electric communication was beckoning in a new oral age for the west, albeit one mediated by, and which would mediate in turn, the cognitive modes developed in relation to the technologies of the visual age: 'any Western child today grows up in this kind of magical repetitive world as he hears advertisements on radio and TV' ([1962] 1971, 19).

To McLuhan both the visual and oral conditions were problematic, though in different ways. While the technology of the visual age had led to a narcissistic entrancement by the subject-centred, linear logic of language, the oral age presented the threat of reducing human consciousness to a de-individuated, tribal identity, liable to outbursts of mass panic and irrationality. Rather than endorsing either, in the prologue to his text McLuhan therefore calls for the modern mind to develop an ability to transfer information between the various sensory channels and symbolic systems which the technologies of the new, post-visual oral age would appeal to simultaneously. 'Our extended faculties and sense now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our

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private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes *rational* co-existence possible' ([1962] 1971, 5). The phrase 'rational co-existence' seemingly has a double-edged meaning here. On the one hand it evokes the rational coexistence of individuals in a social mass. But it also seems to indicate the co-existence, in the modern mind, of the myriad symbolic systems with which it would have to engage. In developing the ability to translate or transliterate between these systems, the subject would demystify their workings, loosening their emotive grip on the mind through the realisation that none presented an objective or authoritative model of reality. The idea is strikingly similar to that implied by Houédard's principle of coexistentialism, and may even be alluded to in his coinage of the term. Like McLuhan's 'rational co-existence', Houédard's 'coexistentialism' partly evokes a sense of interplay or interaction between different modes of communication and cognition which would have the effect of emphasising their mutual contingency: their lack of divine authority.

Having said all this, perhaps the most important allusion in the term 'coexistentialism' is that which links it to the overarching spiritual imperatives of Houédard's art. 'Coexistentialism', that is, also expresses a contemporary concern, within the Catholic Church and Houédard's own thinking, with the co-existence of belief systems. In expanding on this point we must first emphasise that the object of Houédard's poetry was always, at some level, God, or union with God, though in Houédard's terminology 'God' must be re-envisaged as a more nebulous and syncretic force than the term might suggest. In his 1963 essay 'Beat and Afterbeat', Houédard stated that 'poetry all art is one of universal worship à l'insu of [unbeknownst to] god the unknown' (140). In this sense, the renunciation of sign systems enacted through his poetry, though it predicted some of the concerns of post-modernism, largely expressed a more unique authorial quandary. It embodied a sense that any formulation of God in subjective thought necessarily comprised a movement out of or away from God, or

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rather, away from that inner component of the human mind which was shared with or indivisible from God.

Houédard adapted this idea from the negative and apophatic traditions of various world religions.^{ix} His posthumous *Commentaries On Meister Eckhart Sermons* (2000), for example, focus on two paradoxes of consciousness, both outlined by recourse to a global range of theological traditions, and in particular to the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-c1327) and the Sufi mystic Ibn' Arabi (1165-1240). Firstly there is 'the paradox of perpetual creation, that we are continuously receiving being without any interruption, and this being is the self-gift of God. So we have the paradox as to whether we can say it is God's Being or our being; He gives it to us as ours' (4). In other words, the most inward aspect of the human mind, preceding subjective consciousness, is actually a facet of God, separated from his elementary, indivisible state so that he can recognise and celebrate himself: his 'self-gift'. The inner core of each human mind can thus be defined as both human and God, or as being shared with God. Secondly there is 'the paradox of what St. Paul calls epectasy, which is the continuous advance of the mind to God, which goes on through time and through eternity so that we never reach God but we always journey towards him' (4). The mind in its outer, subjective aspect, that is, can never inhabit this inner state of union. Instead, it passes out of it in the very act of reflecting upon it, rendering it an other: an object of contemplation rather than a state of being. This is the moment of thought, and of all communication, including poetry.

Putting aside the finer details of this apophatic schema for now, the salient point is that Houédard's poetry both reflected and defined his faith. In this sense it is significant that he composed his first typestracts during the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, an event indicating a new culture of 'aggiornamento' or 'bringing up to date' within the Catholic Church. This culture was partly characterised by increased interaction with other faiths, as Houédard noted in 'Beat and Afterbeat': 'what Vat II is ABOUT is universal need to re-phrase without

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loss of content so as to communicate with the non-us' (1963, 140). His own contribution to that culture was an idea he called 'The Wider Ecumenism', involving interaction with a diverse range of spiritual traditions from inside and outside organised religion. In his 1965 article 'The Wider Ecumenism', Houédard asserted that 'god has spoken in a variety of ways' to 'all humanity' (118):

so that our basically jewish-greek-northeuropean synthesis feels its limitations as sacred history & feels the need to incorporate the sacred history of the regional insights of african-indian-eastern genius, as well as the nonregional insights of technological mentalities that are today's mental theophanies (118-19).

The Wider Ecumenism, in other words, would entail dialogue not only with a global range of religions, but also with various artistic and intellectual communities, including those of the 1960s counter-culture, and with international communist and anarchist movements. In a 1963 letter to his friend Stefan Themerson, Houédard referred approvingly to the expanded ecumenical sensibilities made possible by VAT II, noting that 'catholic communism, catholic atheism and coexistentialism are becoming household words' ([April 14, 1963]).^x In so doing he endowed the last of those terms with further depth, rendering the combination of language and image in the typestracts a metaphor for the co-existence of different systems of faith and belief. This aspect of coexistentialism is evident in the references to Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly Tantric ritual, which permeate the language and symbology of the typestracts.

In short, the layered connotations of the term 'coexistentialism' suggest the need for a more nuanced reading of Houédard's concrete poetry than is perhaps invited by Jamie Hilder's generalising dismissal, in a recent survey of the concrete movement worldwide, of 'concrete poets who sought a spiritual experience via the merging of logos and imago' (2016, 27). As

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noted, it is the typestracts which express Houédard's coexistentialist poetics most strikingly, and in attempting such a reading over the remainder of the article, I therefore want to focus on some examples of that form. But before doing so, let me turn briefly to another definition of the typestracts, provided by Edwin Morgan – who coined the term – in a letter to Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, on January 10, 1978. Morgan was attempting, unsuccessfully, to have the word 'typestract' added to the dictionary, and in making his case he recalled first using it in a letter to Houédard sent on or around November 20, 1963:

Houédard [had] sent me some of his 'typewriter poems' (there was as yet no term for them), and I wrote back enthusiastically about them, referring to them as typestracts. The term arose swiftly and spontaneously in the course of writing the letter, but I suppose it was a portmanteau word from 'typewriter' and 'abstract'.

As Morgan's letter implies, one of the defining characteristics of the typestracts is their 'abstract' quality, involving not just an absence of semantic content but also, in most cases, a lack of any clearly figurative or pictorial visual element. In this sense, we should not expect the themes and contexts just outlined to be borne out by explicit visual or linguistic gesture. At the same time, the typestracts do display various recurrent compositional features which cultivate a general impression of multi-media ferment, and of *apophasis* – a renunciation of positive expression – which allows us to infer that more precise set of compositional reference-points.

The multi-media character of the typestracts has been central to discussion so far. In focusing on some exemplary pieces, I am therefore going to concentrate on the latter of the qualities just mentioned: *apophasis*.^{xi} The apophatic quality of the typestracts is conveyed most obviously by their wordlessness. Whereas earlier concrete poets used the visual arrangement

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of language to enhance or clarify semantic sense, in Houédard's work the presentation of language as a visual entity generally involved the erasure of semantic meaning. But the orientation of these poems around their implied object is more complex than that simple renunciative gesture would imply. Rather than the typestracts purporting to assume some transcendent expressive capacity by casting off the word – so that the visual structure itself is seen to possess some magical intimacy with its referent, or to become its own referent – the structure generally seems characterised by its relationship with the enveloping three-dimensional void whose presence it implies.^{xiii} It is this encompassing and permeating space, and not the visual form 'pushed into shape' by it – as John Sharkey put it in his introduction to *Mindplay* (1971, 18) – which stands for the poetic object, specifically for that inexpressible union with the divine outlined earlier. The structures are rather representations of the processes of thought, prayer or supplicatory ritual by which the subject attempts some intimacy with or awareness of that state.

These two aspects of apophatic composition – the absorption of language into abstract visual motif, but also the orientation of the visual structure around a blank space – are evident in almost all of Houédard's typestracts. But there are nuances to be observed in the terms of their deployment. In some cases, for example, the structuring void seems to be enclosed or captured by the visual form, as in the piece 'Chakrometer' from *A Book of Chakras* (1967, n.pag [fig. 1]), which suggests a hollow cylindrical structure containing an emptiness. **Figure 1. Dom Sylvester Houédard. 'Chakrometer.' [1967]. From *A Book of Chakras*. All images are reproduced by kind permission of the Prinknash Abbey Trustees.** In other cases, the emptiness seems rather to envelop the design from without, as in this untitled work (fig. 2) from a later collection, *Like Contemplation* (1972, n.pag.). **Figure 2. [Cube Typestract]. 1972. From *Like Contemplation*. This and all subsequent images are reproduced with acknowledgements to Writers Forum.** A more significant distinction,

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perhaps, is that some of the typestracks are granted a degree of conceptual clarity by an accompanying tag or annotation, as in the impression of ascetic awareness generated by the phrase ‘w/out knowing but to know you arnt’. Indeed, these linguistic tags occasionally specify the particular form of ritual or prayer evoked by the design, which therefore assumes more precise, diagrammatic values than we might expect. For better or worse, the design also generally takes on more exclusively theological or spiritual overtones.

Houédard’s ‘Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases....’ (fig. 3), for example, from *Tantric Poems Perhaps* (1967, n.pag), is one of many which pay homage to the ‘yantras’ or visual art-objects used in Tantric ritual. **Figure 3. ‘Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases with Mount Meru up the Middle.’ 1967. From *Tantric Poems Perhaps*.** According to Philip Rawson’s *The Art of Tantra* (1973), yantras are diagrams of locations on the body and the surface of the world assumed to contain the energy of a divine creation process. They thus function as ‘maps of the system, together with detailed instructions for working the mechanism’, providing information or cues regarding the forms of psychosomatic activity by which these points of energy could be engaged or interacted with, and by which subjective being could thus be merged with the creation process (Rawson, [1978] 2003, 14).^{xiii} This particular piece is a representation of energy channels called ‘nadīs’ located within the ‘subtle body’, the body as envisaged in a rarified, spiritually defined state aloof to empirical study. An equivalent image in Tantric art would indicate a series of psychosomatic states to be passed through by engaging particular points on those energy-channels called ‘chakras’, in order to cultivate greater and greater intimacy with the energy of creation (Rawson, [1978] 2003).^{xiv} Accepting the unavoidably new-age connotations of this terminology, the key point is that Houédard’s ‘staircases’ are not images of the creation process or the creator itself. Instead, they represent and solicit particular forms of mental and bodily activity undertaken in response to

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it. As per the general apophatic impulse of the typestracts, the viewer's gaze is averted from the true object of the poem.

Returning to an earlier point, even in those cases where we cannot define that state of response or orientation using a linguistic annotation, the typestracts' visual forms still invite analogies with various theories of mental and spiritual epiphany. Often they feature recurring sets of motifs or shapes which gradually shift form or position, as in this untitled typestract (fig. 4) from *Like Contemplation* (1972, n.pag.). **Figure 4. [Screen Typestract]. 1972. From *Like Contemplation*.** Minimal gesture though it is, in the broader context of Houédard's theological writing the incremental shrinkage of these screens seems redolent with associations of Platonic metaphysics and Christian mysticism: the idea of reality as a projection of shadows, and the gradual renunciation of subjective sense as coextensive with some blossoming spiritual awareness.

The exclusively theological interpretations that tend to emerge from such 'close readings' offer some context, if not justification, for the dismissal of Houédard's work as eccentrically or fatuously transcendentalist: in spite of its emphasis on the inexpressibility of the divine, and the deep scholarship on which it is based. But the typestracts always also express the more wordly, secular dimensions of Houédard's poetics: its playful circumvention of the yearning towards transcendent expression in first-wave avant-garde art; its reformulation of the Sartrean relationship between being and néant; its expression of an interplay of different symbolic systems demanded by McLuhan's age of electric communication; and, which *is* clear from the examples just given, its openness to a range of global and non-orthodox spiritualities, developed in the context of the Second Vatican Council.

Bearing all this in mind, let us return, finally, to the opening distinction between concrete poetry as exemplified by Finlay's practice and Houédard's. It is often argued that by removing the foundational significance of language from the concrete poem, the quality which

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made it something of its own time and place, rather than a repetition of experiments conducted half a century earlier, was also shorn away. It seems, however, both from an exploration of the term ‘coexistentialism’, and from the richness and scope of Houédard’s poetic practice during the 1960s-70s, that we should acknowledge the value and timeliness of this other, coexistentialist concrete poetics, and of Houédard’s contribution to late-twentieth-century poetry and art.

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ⁱ Finlay's comment is quoted in the entry on his work in the 1970 reference book *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*. The entry is anonymous but includes a biographical note by Edwin Morgan.

ⁱⁱ The tenets of intermedia practice which I have in mind here, and their ideological and political connotations, are evident in Dick Higgins's 1966 manifesto 'Intermedia':

The concept of the separation between media arose in the renaissance. The idea that a painting is made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought – categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers – which we call the Feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. This essentially mechanistic approach continued to be relevant throughout the first two industrial revolutions, just concluded, and into the present era of automation....

However, the social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach. We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant ([1]).

ⁱⁱⁱ As regards critical consensus on Finlay's work, the influential critic of literary modernism Marjorie Perloff, for example, has written of it on several occasions, notably in 'From "Suprematism" to Language Game: The Blue and Brown Poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay' (2010). The long-standing critical support of art historian Stephen Bann has also been important in ensuring its reputation.

^{iv} This comment appears in Morgan's untitled biographical note on Houédard in the second edition of *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (1975).

^v Houédard's delivered this lecture in two parts, at the Royal College of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, on March 2 and May 12, 1964. The transcript quoted here is stored with the Edwin Morgan Papers at Glasgow University Library.

^{vi} See Houédard's reference to this period in his 1972 autobiographical note 'Chronobiography/ Autozoography', for example, in which he describes the theme of his dissertation as 'liberty in Sartre' (26).

^{vii} See for example Gomringer's 1956 statement 'Concrete Poetry', which defines the style as:

International-supra national. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there. (68)

^{viii} In his 'Eyear' lecture, for example, Houédard described concrete poetry as emerging 'partly [out of] the planetarisation effect of our global village culture as we move out of the 4th season of the industrial/mechanical age into the 5th season of the electronic & spaceage' (1964, n.pag).

^{ix} Though it also seems to owe something to Sartre's idea of the relationship between human consciousness and pure being: between being-for-itself and being-in-itself.

^x Rather than being explicitly dated, this letter is marked 'yom EOstre/Pasques/Pesach', a coded reference to Easter Sunday. 'Yom' is a Biblical Hebrew term often translated as 'day', 'Ēostre' a Germanic goddess from whose name the English word 'Easter' derives, and 'Pasques' and 'Pesach' Old French and Jewish terms for Easter and Passover respectively. The letter is also accompanied by poems dated around Easter 1963, and followed by another, dated '180463' – seemingly by Themerson, upon receipt – which begins 'My dear moncher/ I wrote as you niticed [sic.] on EASTER DAY'. The first letter must also date from 1963 then, when Easter Sunday fell on April 14.

^{xi} The term ‘apophasis’ appeals because of its allusions both to apophatic theology – the idea that the nature of God can only be indicated by rejecting of all positive descriptions of him – and to literary and rhetorical contexts, in which it would function as a form of irony, or conscious reference through conspicuous non-reference.

^{xii} This may remind us of the relationship between typographic form and visual space outlined in Mallarmé’s essay ‘Crisis in Poetry’ (1896), which describes printed language as ‘a fragmentary disposition with alternations and oppositions, all working towards the total rhythm of the white spaces, which would be the poem silenced; but it is translated to some extent by each pendent’ (232).

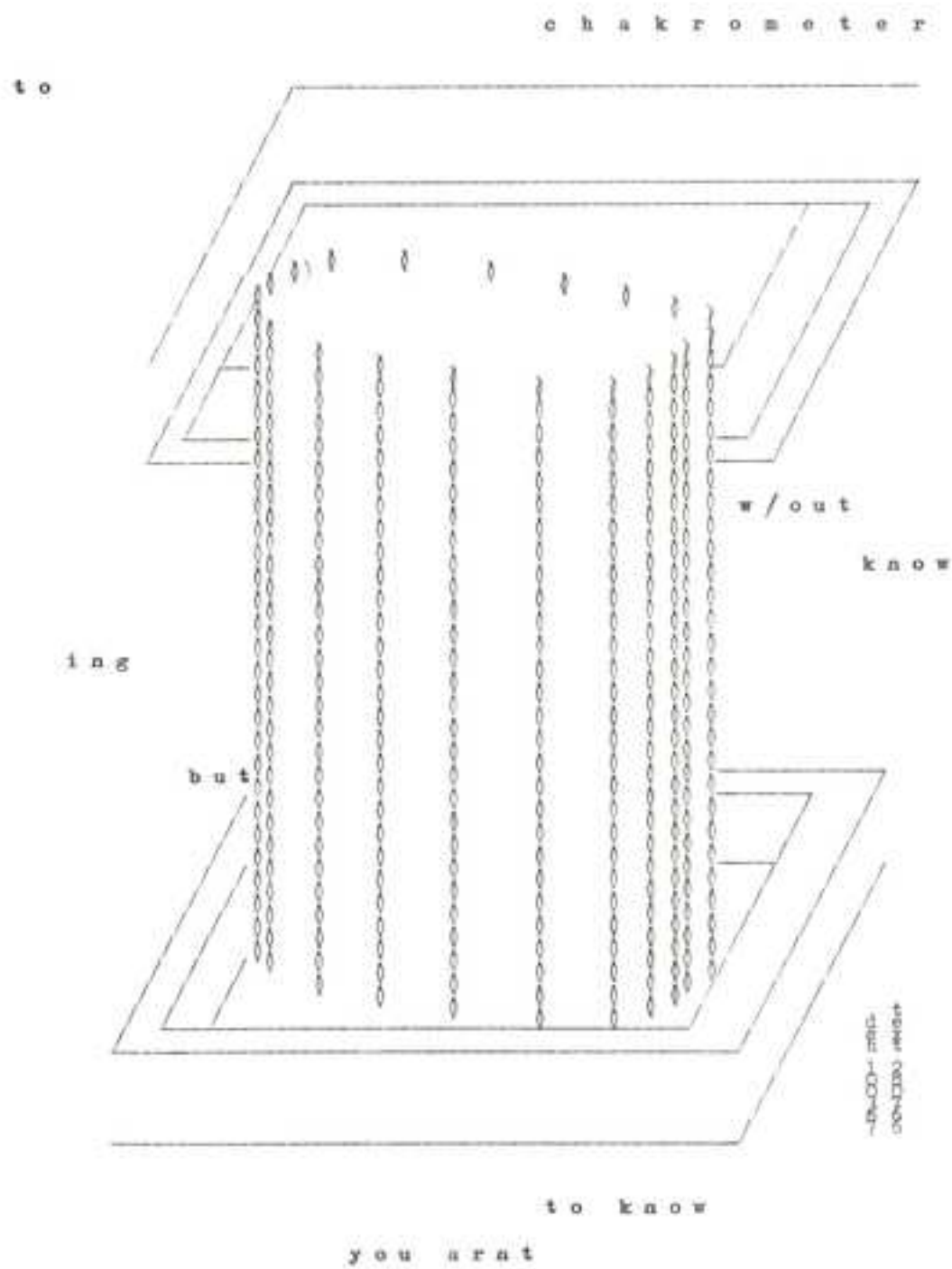
^{xiii} Rawson describes the Tantric creation process based primarily on Hindu rather than Buddhist variants of Tantra. According to Tantric mythology, he states, the entire ‘universe of phenomena’ ([1978] 2003, 14) is generated by:

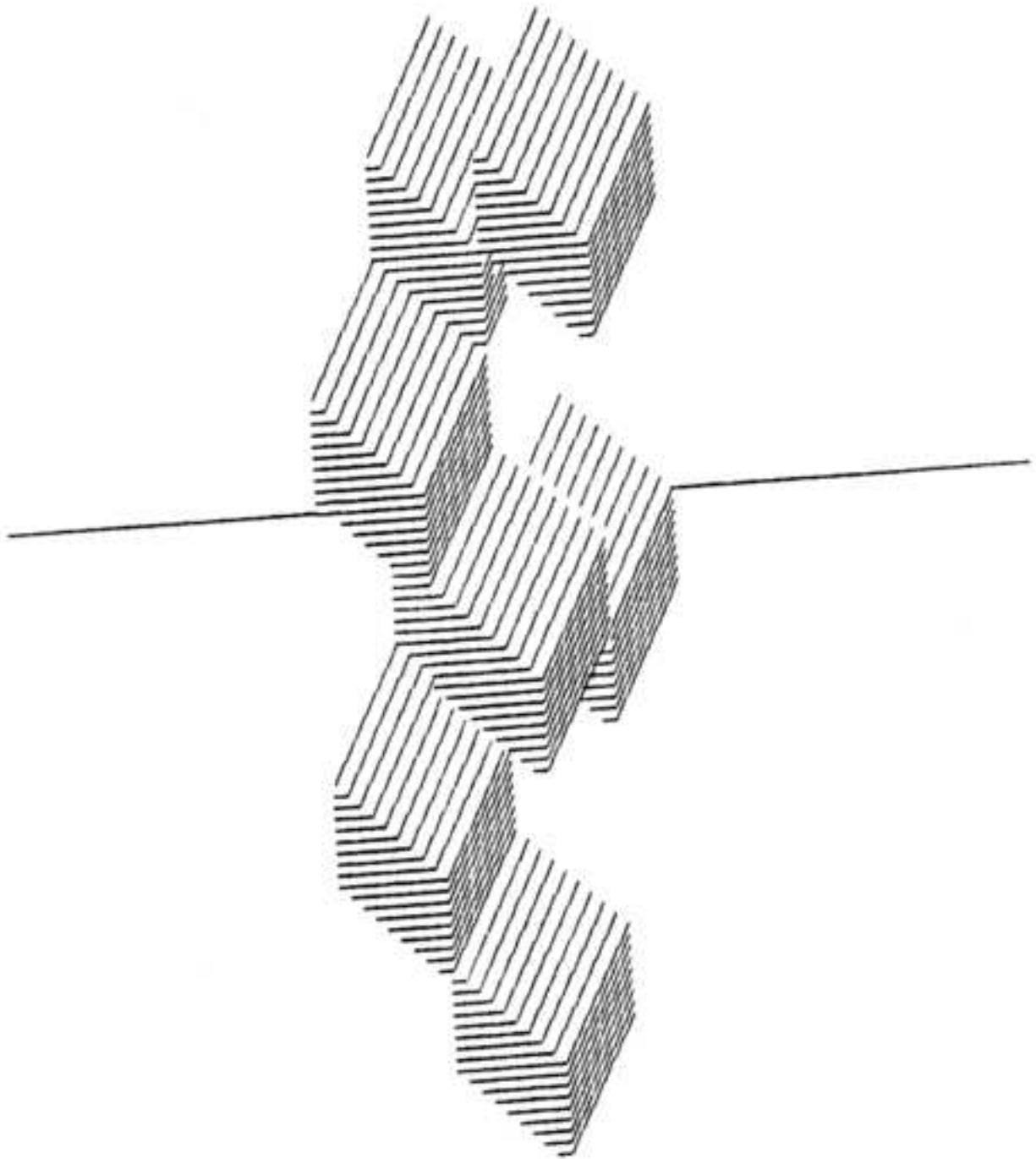
[t]he active play of a female creative principle, the Goddess of many forms, sexually penetrated by an invisible, indescribable, seminal male. In ultimate fact He has generated Her for his own enjoyment. And the play, because it is analogous to the activity of sexual intercourse, is pleasurable to her (9-10).

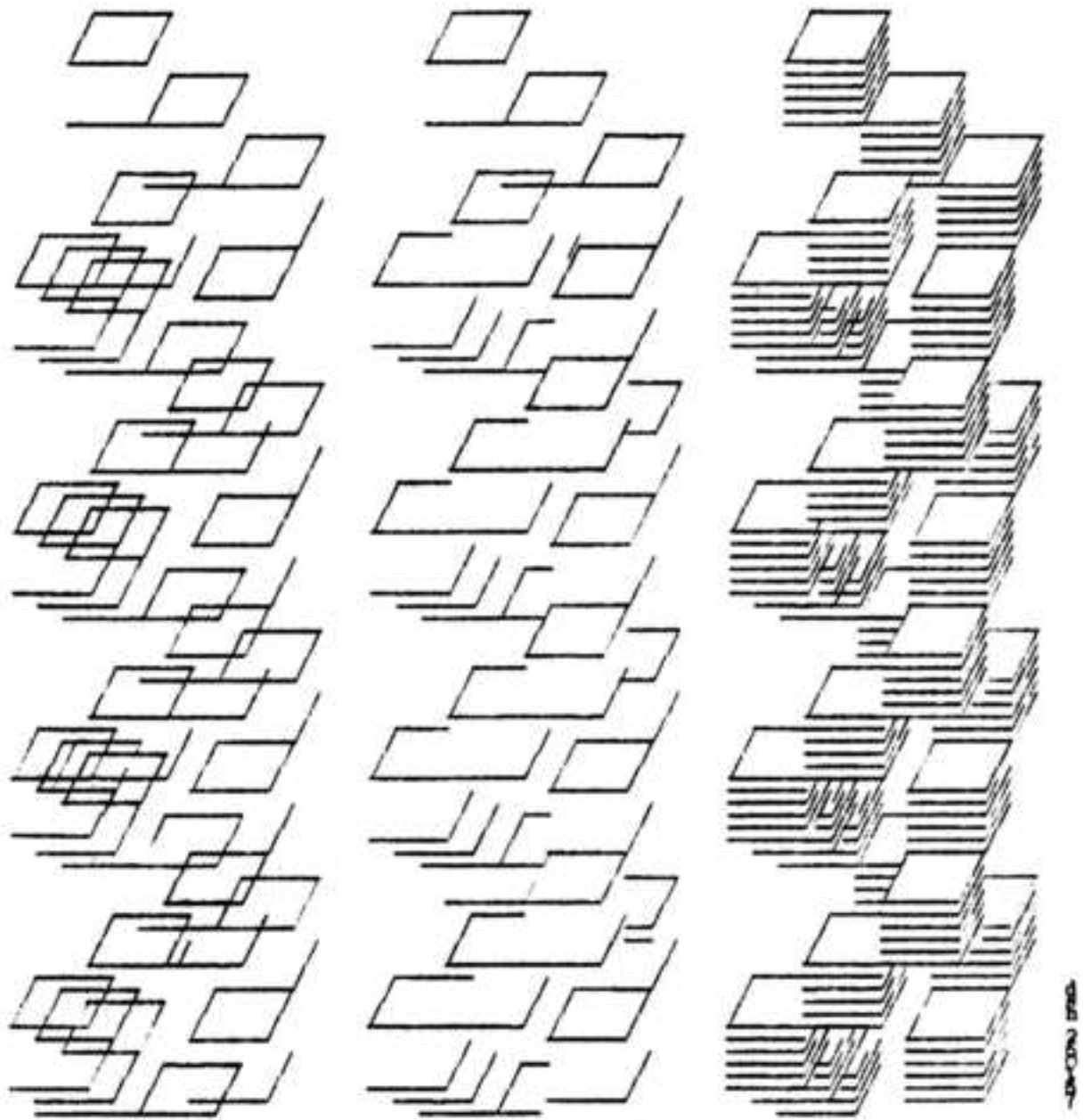
As noted, the energy of this creation process is concentrated at particular points in the body and world, so that the perceptible universe has a ‘subtle four-dimensional skeleton of channels’ (14). Thus, while the creation process is impalpable to subjective consciousness, Tantric practice can familiarise or merge subjective being with the energy of creation through a kind of interaction with these points of energy called ‘sādhana’: ‘i.e. psychosomatic effort, assimilating his own body to higher and higher levels of cosmic body-pattern. In the end he may become identical with the original double-sexed deity, which is involved, without

beginning or end, in blissful intercourse with itself' (14). Much sādhanā involves mimicking the creation process, occasionally through ritual sex.

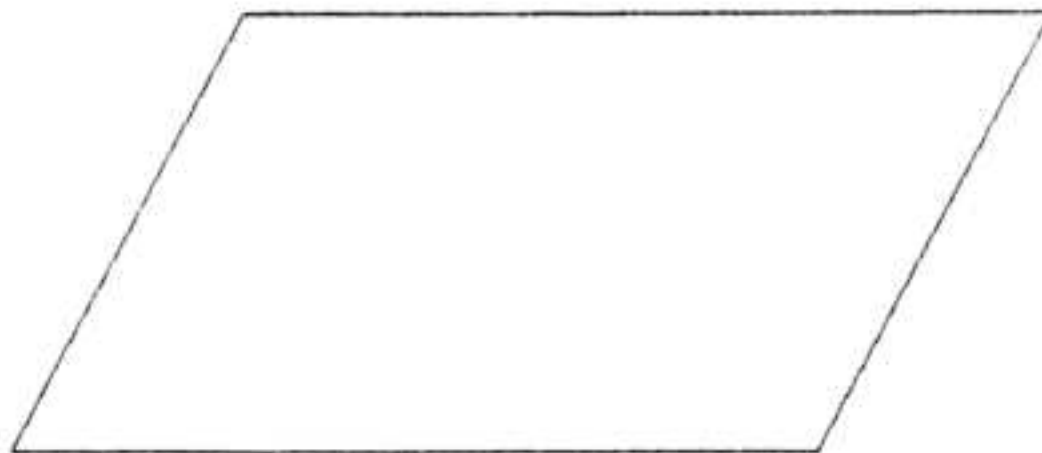
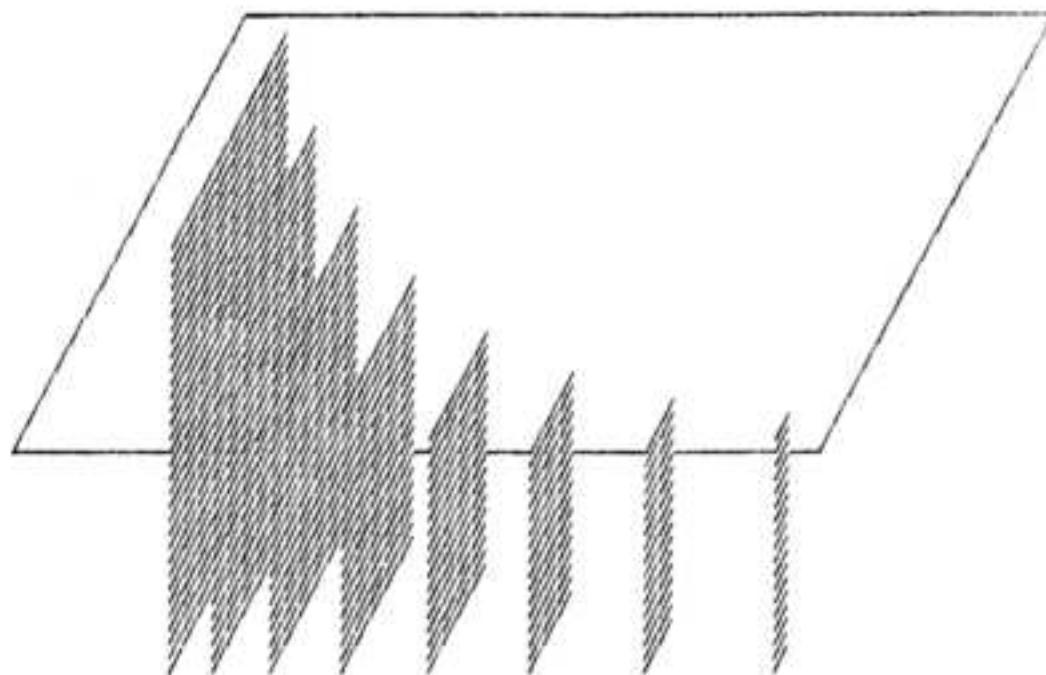
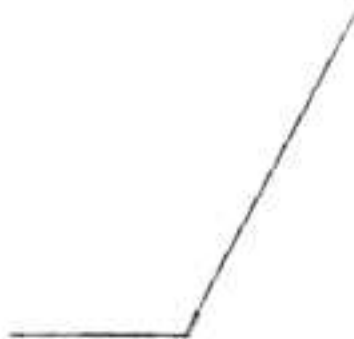
^{xiv} These are ideas common within the aspect of Tantric ritual defined as Yoga. Houédard's terms 'ida' and 'pingala' refer to two of the nadīs within the subtle body, which spiral upwards from left and right-hand positions around a central spinal nadī or 'suṣumna'. All the nadīs have associative qualities and locations, ida connected to femininity, the moon and the Ganges, pingala to masculinity, the sun and the Yamuna river, and suṣumna to the central point of the universe in Tantric mythology, the sacred, five-peaked Mount Meru: hence Houédard's titular reference (Rawson, [1978] 2003 [excluding references to Houédard's work]).







visualisation of idapingala staircases with mount neru up the middle



Cool Nothing: Dom Sylvester Houédard's Coexistentialist Concrete Poetics

In 1963 Dom Sylvester Houédard published the article 'Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay' in Herbert Spencer's journal *Typographica*, the first account published in the UK of what had become known as concrete poetry, a kind of poetry in which, simply put, the visual or material elements of language were central to meaning. Finlay, the article's nominal subject, became disillusioned with the interpretation of concrete poetry, and of his work in particular, which it seemed to represent, describing it curtly in a 1970 biographical note as 'less useful' than other accounts (qtd in 'FINLAY, Ian Hamilton', 369).¹ The reason was perhaps that Finlay always held concrete poetry to be a fundamentally linguistic art, augmented by visual and phonetic devices which served as indications of syntax, or to enhance or modify a central theme, but always oriented around a nucleus of meaning provided by words. Houédard presented another idea of concrete poetry, more in tune with the artistic spirit of the decade if more removed from the aims of the first, Northern-European and Brazilian concrete poets during the mid-1950s. In a spirit exemplary of the experimental generation, he emphasised concrete poetry's capacity to blur and dissolve medium boundaries, bringing the visual and linguistic registers into a kind of relativising co-existence.

As John Sharkey noted in the introduction to his 1971 concrete poetry anthology *Mindplay*, Finlay and Houédard were the two 'seminal personalities' associated with the style in Britain (14). Indeed, Houédard's prolific creative and critical output helped to generate an understanding of concrete poetry that stood in fruitful contrast to Finlay's, and by the close of the 1960s his work was well-known in Britain, and to exponents and critics of concrete poetry worldwide. It would even be possible to argue that by the time Sharkey's anthology appeared, Finlay's sense of what concrete poetry represented had been submerged by a wave of creative and critical activity which redefined it along the lines implied by intermedia art and counter-

cultural ideology. On these terms, concrete poetry's main value lay in evading the constraints of medium, thereby placing metaphorical or literal pressure on broader systems of authority, control and categorisation.ⁱⁱ But although Houédard was sympathetic to some such set of ideas, his own work cannot be defined on these terms nearly as neatly as Finlay's disapprobation assumed. In any case, across the intervening decades the situation vis-à-vis critical attention has entirely shifted: while Finlay's practice is now celebrated as a striking manifestation of late-modernist literary aesthetics, and for its trenchant response to the ideological tenets of modern art, Houédard's has reverted to something of the status of a niche interest.ⁱⁱⁱ Admittedly, the publication of Nicola Simpson's *Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard* (2013), an engaging and superbly presented collection of critical essays, reminiscences and reproductions, indicates a limited resurgence of interest, in line with the more general critical revaluation of concrete poetry which has taken place over the last five years or so. But in many instances Houédard's work is still written off as an eccentric manifestation of a sixties fascination with phantasmagoria, synaesthesia and new-age spirituality.

That perception is understandable but unfair, or rather, incomplete. As critical interest in concrete poetry continues to grow, it therefore seems worth offering a more nuanced account of Houédard's poetics than has so far appeared, by reference to a word which resurfaces throughout his *Typographica* article. That word is 'coexistentialist', and it is a term in which several layers of meaning can be identified, besides its superficial use to define the co-existence of the visual and linguistic registers already alluded to. In this article I wish to focus on four – some, perhaps all, of which were consciously invoked by Houédard – before turning to some examples of his work in which his coexistentialist poetics is borne out. The first involves the relationship between what might be called the first and second-wave Western avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and the 1950-60s respectively; another involves French

existentialism, especially the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre; a third Marshall McLuhan's 1962 text *The Gutenberg Galaxy*; and a fourth the spirit of ecumenism within the Catholic Church which Houédard served as a monk, priest and theologian during the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65.

Before running through these ideas, it is worth defining this idea of merging the visual and linguistic registers a little more precisely. I am associating that quality particularly with Houédard's so-called 'typestracts', although it is identifiable to varying degrees in almost all of his work. Typestracts were made by using the linguistic and diacritical marks of the typewriter to build up precise geometrical constructions, generally set in an implied three-dimensional void, sometimes with more fluid or dispersed visual elements floating or swimming around a central edifice. Language and image co-exist in a simple sense because we are presented with a visual image made from pieces of language, using a tool for writing, which thus retains, besides its visible form, what Edwin Morgan calls a 'lingering literary hookup' (1975, 729).^{iv} More subtly, one might say that the visual and linguistic co-exist because the work exists outside conventional symbolic frameworks, avoiding obvious identification as either visual art or language, but potentially identifiable as either or both, that identification to be determined by the reader or viewer rather than pre-emptively controlled by the poet.

In short, the typestracts are works which we might see as using linguistic marks to make visual art, or as occupying a space between or beyond language and image. These are, of course, qualities associable with a raft of visual-linguistic experiments conducted by poets and artists across the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, most famously the Dadaists and Futurists. However, to return to the four affinities mentioned above, the term 'coexistentialist' refers as much to the spirit in which this merging of registers was undertaken as to the process itself, a spirit particular to both the cultural epoch and the theological tradition from which Houédard's work emerged.

His *Typographica* article had, for example, pointedly distinguished between the ‘coexistentialist’ modern art and literature produced since World War Two and that which came before it, especially between the Salon des Refusés exhibition of 1863 and World War One, which Houédard describes as ‘constrictive’ or ‘constructive’. The crux of this distinction is between what he calls ‘the largely pre-WW/1 move to the authentic and non-mimetic’ and the ‘largely post-WW/2 overspill to ... mutual interpretation, rejection of divides & borders, delight in accepting ambiguity/ambivalence: alive blurring of frontiers between art & art, mind & mind, world & world, mind art & world’ (1963, 47). Artworks of construction and constriction, Houédard suggests, were compelled by a kind of urge towards transcendence, the yearning for an expressive or communicative register whose objectivity would be staked on a movement beyond signification. This could be attempted ‘constructively’, by the nominal development of such registers – the quintessential example perhaps being the Zaum language of the Russian Futurists – and/or by ‘constriction’. This involved the destruction or undermining of existing registers to clear space for the new, what Houédard calls ‘the necessary negative anti-past ... épurations [cleansing or purging] of eg the Dadaists’ (47). By contrast, coexistentialism stood for a certain equalisation or levelling out, a combination of expressive registers which accepted and emphasised their mutual non-transcendence or non-objectivity: their containment in symbolic frameworks defined by custom and context rather than mystical affinity with their objects.

Houédard associates coexistentialism specifically with concrete poetry, describing its characteristics under the consecutive headings ‘constricting’ and ‘constructive’ before alighting on the third term as if to offer a conclusive definition. In this sense, coexistentialism set concrete poetry apart from earlier avant-garde art and literature by what Houédard called, in his 1964 lecture ‘Eyear’, a ‘sense of zen-peace found in accepting things for the sake of their hollowness’ (n.pag.).^v It is useful, in this sense, to think of the frequent absence of language in

the typestracts as evidence not of some compulsion towards transcendent expression or communication, but of a withdrawal from that very urge, a certain silent repose which is both ascetic and whimsical. Another of Houédard's terms for concrete poetry, 'Paradada' – the title of a 1964 *Times Literary Supplement* article – confirms this suggestion: concrete as 'beyond' or 'other than' Dada; or, as Houédard put it in that article, 'un-un & cool nothing paradada (surdada) outgrowing sticky fears of inner neant' (Houédard, 1964).

However, the appearance of the Sartrean term 'néant' is also crucial here. In biographical terms, that is, Houédard's coexistentialism represented not so much a movement beyond Dada as beyond a literary and philosophical movement whose title is embedded in the term itself: existentialism. At Sant Anselmo Benedictine College in Rome in the early 1950s, Houédard had completed a licentiate dissertation on Jean-Paul Sartre, a process which he later referred to as pivotal to his poetic development.^{vi} Moreover, as a native of the Channel Islands Houédard was bilingual, steeped in a Francophone tradition which encompassed the French existentialist literature of the mid-twentieth century.

Commenting on his dissertation in a 1987 article on Beckett, Houédard remarked that 'Beckett's non-pessimism (say non-non-optimism for greater precision) has here a *place* and *function*, eliminative of what I called in my fifties thesis on *Sartre and Nothingness* the failure of Sartre to (not *revel* in but) feel at home with this Néant *in* which (and *that*) we are' (53). The reference to Sartre is fleeting, but it must be primarily to his major philosophical work *L'Être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) (1943). This text defines the mode of being which characterises human consciousness (being-for-itself) as an absence or negation of the pure, undifferentiated being of the inanimate universe (being-in-itself) (Sartre, [1958] 2003). The prerequisite of human consciousness, in other words, is not any essential quality or function but the negation or nihilation of a prior state. This meant, amongst other things, that human consciousness had to be defined as arbitrary or non-necessary: lacking any pre-determining

purpose. The idea of such a purpose rather emerged through the process by which consciousness perpetually transcended and reflected on itself, by which a sense of the self or ego emerged, and by which meaning was granted in tandem to the external world (ibid.).

For Houédard, the anguish at the core of this existentialist condition was rooted in some sense of an absent alternative, an imaginable yet impossible mode of being which would possess a pre-determined, metaphysically definable quality or function, expressed through a language or sign system which embodied that same truth. In other words, Houédard defined existentialism as constrictive/constructive: characterised by dread at the sheer contingency of human consciousness and its systems of communication. Concrete poetry, by contrast, accepted the ‘néant’ as neutral fact, playfully combining language and image as if to express a cool awareness of the arbitrariness of man-made sign systems, and of the meanings they inscribed on the self and world. Making its home in the néant, concrete poetry redefined the existentialist condition along the same lines as Beckett’s more anguished quest for neutrality: not existentialism, but coexistentialism.

And yet the word contains further layers of significance. In his *Typographica* article Houédard also defined coexistentialism as a necessary condition of ‘[t]he shrinking world: contracted/constricted negatively by bomb & spacefears, positively by jet-communications telstar space-probe. This makes coexistentialism inevitable, international: i.e. all arts merge, barriers crumble, are scrambled’ (1963, 50). This idea of a global society entwined and homogenised by mass communication technology and the pervasive threat of nuclear war – amongst other things – partly takes its cue from the concrete poet Eugen Gomringer’s 1950s manifestos.^{vii} But it also brings to mind the condition of ‘the global village’ identified by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published the year before Houédard’s article ([1962] 1971, 31). Moreover, Houédard’s 1960s critical writing shows a clear awareness and digestion of McLuhan’s terminology.^{viii} This implies another hook-up within the word

‘coexistentialism’, linking it to a similar term used in the prologue to McLuhan’s text, ‘co-existence’. McLuhan’s term indicates the potential ability of the modern mind to hold the information and ideas received through different symbolic systems in a kind of sceptical tension.

The Gutenberg Galaxy distinguishes between the ‘visual’ condition brought about by the development of the phonetic alphabet and the printing press and the ‘oral’ or ‘aural’ condition of pre- and non-literate societies. In short, the former is defined by the perception of reality as ordered three-dimensional space, pursuit of linear causal links between objects and events, and the endowment of the individual with rational power and self-awareness. In oral cultures, three-dimensional space is not recognised in the same way, thought is formed in passive, emotionally configured response to external stimuli, and the individual does not recognise themselves so discretely from the social mass. McLuhan famously prophesied that the advent of electric communication was beckoning in a new oral age for the west, albeit one mediated by, and which would mediate in turn, the cognitive modes developed in relation to the technologies of the visual age: ‘any Western child today grows up in this kind of magical repetitive world as he hears advertisements on radio and TV’ ([1962] 1971, 19).

To McLuhan both the visual and oral conditions were problematic, though in different ways. While the technology of the visual age had led to a narcissistic entrancement by the subject-centred, linear logic of language, the oral age presented the threat of reducing human consciousness to a de-individuated, tribal identity, liable to outbursts of mass panic and irrationality. Rather than endorsing either, in the prologue to his text McLuhan therefore calls for the modern mind to develop an ability to transfer information between the various sensory channels and symbolic systems which the technologies of the new, post-visual oral age would appeal to simultaneously. ‘Our extended faculties and sense now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious. Our technologies, like our

private senses, now demand an interplay and ratio that makes *rational* co-existence possible' ([1962] 1971, 5). The phrase 'rational co-existence' seemingly has a double-edged meaning here. On the one hand it evokes the rational coexistence of individuals in a social mass. But it also seems to indicate the co-existence, in the modern mind, of the myriad symbolic systems with which it would have to engage. In developing the ability to translate or transliterate between these systems, the subject would demystify their workings, loosening their emotive grip on the mind through the realisation that none presented an objective or authoritative model of reality. The idea is strikingly similar to that implied by Houédard's principle of coexistentialism, and may even be alluded to in his coinage of the term. Like McLuhan's 'rational co-existence', Houédard's 'coexistentialism' partly evokes a sense of interplay or interaction between different modes of communication and cognition which would have the effect of emphasising their mutual contingency: their lack of divine authority.

Having said all this, perhaps the most important allusion in the term 'coexistentialism' is that which links it to the overarching spiritual imperatives of Houédard's art. 'Coexistentialism', that is, also expresses a contemporary concern, within the Catholic Church and Houédard's own thinking, with the co-existence of belief systems. In expanding on this point we must first emphasise that the object of Houédard's poetry was always, at some level, God, or union with God, though in Houédard's terminology 'God' must be re-envisaged as a more nebulous and syncretic force than the term might suggest. In his 1963 essay 'Beat and Afterbeat', Houédard stated that 'poetry all art is one of universal worship à l'insu of [unbeknownst to] god the unknown' (140). In this sense, the renunciation of sign systems enacted through his poetry, though it predicted some of the concerns of post-modernism, largely expressed a more unique authorial quandary. It embodied a sense that any formulation of God in subjective thought necessarily comprised a movement out of or away from God, or

rather, away from that inner component of the human mind which was shared with or indivisible from God.

Houédard adapted this idea from the negative and apophatic traditions of various world religions.^{ix} His posthumous *Commentaries On Meister Eckhart Sermons* (2000), for example, focus on two paradoxes of consciousness, both outlined by recourse to a global range of theological traditions, and in particular to the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-c1327) and the Sufi mystic Ibn' Arabi (1165-1240). Firstly there is 'the paradox of perpetual creation, that we are continuously receiving being without any interruption, and this being is the self-gift of God. So we have the paradox as to whether we can say it is God's Being or our being; He gives it to us as ours' (4). In other words, the most inward aspect of the human mind, preceding subjective consciousness, is actually a facet of God, separated from his elementary, indivisible state so that he can recognise and celebrate himself: his 'self-gift'. The inner core of each human mind can thus be defined as both human and God, or as being shared with God. Secondly there is 'the paradox of what St. Paul calls epectasy, which is the continuous advance of the mind to God, which goes on through time and through eternity so that we never reach God but we always journey towards him' (4). The mind in its outer, subjective aspect, that is, can never inhabit this inner state of union. Instead, it passes out of it in the very act of reflecting upon it, rendering it an other: an object of contemplation rather than a state of being. This is the moment of thought, and of all communication, including poetry.

Putting aside the finer details of this apophatic schema for now, the salient point is that Houédard's poetry both reflected and defined his faith. In this sense it is significant that he composed his first typestracts during the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, an event indicating a new culture of 'aggiornamento' or 'bringing up to date' within the Catholic Church. This culture was partly characterised by increased interaction with other faiths, as Houédard noted in 'Beat and Afterbeat': 'what Vat II is ABOUT is universal need to re-phrase without

loss of content so as to communicate with the non-us' (1963, 140). His own contribution to that culture was an idea he called 'The Wider Ecumenism', involving interaction with a diverse range of spiritual traditions from inside and outside organised religion. In his 1965 article 'The Wider Ecumenism', Houédard asserted that 'god has spoken in a variety of ways' to 'all humanity' (118):

so that our basically jewish-greek-northeuropean synthesis feels its limitations as sacred history & feels the need to incorporate the sacred history of the regional insights of african-indian-eastern genius, as well as the nonregional insights of technological mentalities that are today's mental theophanies (118-19).

The Wider Ecumenism, in other words, would entail dialogue not only with a global range of religions, but also with various artistic and intellectual communities, including those of the 1960s counter-culture, and with international communist and anarchist movements. In a 1963 letter to his friend Stefan Themerson, Houédard referred approvingly to the expanded ecumenical sensibilities made possible by VAT II, noting that 'catholic communism, catholic atheism and coexistentialism are becoming household words' ([April 14, 1963]).^x In so doing he endowed the last of those terms with further depth, rendering the combination of language and image in the typestracts a metaphor for the co-existence of different systems of faith and belief. This aspect of coexistentialism is evident in the references to Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly Tantric ritual, which permeate the language and symbology of the typestracts.

In short, the layered connotations of the term 'coexistentialism' suggest the need for a more nuanced reading of Houédard's concrete poetry than is perhaps invited by Jamie Hilder's generalising dismissal, in a recent survey of the concrete movement worldwide, of 'concrete poets who sought a spiritual experience via the merging of logos and imago' (2016, 27). As

noted, it is the typestracts which express Houédard's coexistentialist poetics most strikingly, and in attempting such a reading over the remainder of the article, I therefore want to focus on some examples of that form. But before doing so, let me turn briefly to another definition of the typestracts, provided by Edwin Morgan – who coined the term – in a letter to Robert Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, on January 10, 1978. Morgan was attempting, unsuccessfully, to have the word 'typestract' added to the dictionary, and in making his case he recalled first using it in a letter to Houédard sent on or around November 20, 1963:

Houédard [had] sent me some of his 'typewriter poems' (there was as yet no term for them), and I wrote back enthusiastically about them, referring to them as typestracts. The term arose swiftly and spontaneously in the course of writing the letter, but I suppose it was a portmanteau word from 'typewriter' and 'abstract'.

As Morgan's letter implies, one of the defining characteristics of the typestracts is their 'abstract' quality, involving not just an absence of semantic content but also, in most cases, a lack of any clearly figurative or pictorial visual element. In this sense, we should not expect the themes and contexts just outlined to be borne out by explicit visual or linguistic gesture. At the same time, the typestracts do display various recurrent compositional features which cultivate a general impression of multi-media ferment, and of *apophasis* – a renunciation of positive expression – which allows us to infer that more precise set of compositional reference-points.

The multi-media character of the typestracts has been central to discussion so far. In focusing on some exemplary pieces, I am therefore going to concentrate on the latter of the qualities just mentioned: apophasis.^{xi} The apophatic quality of the typestracts is conveyed most obviously by their wordlessness. Whereas earlier concrete poets used the visual arrangement

of language to enhance or clarify semantic sense, in Houédard's work the presentation of language as a visual entity generally involved the erasure of semantic meaning. But the orientation of these poems around their implied object is more complex than that simple renunciative gesture would imply. Rather than the typestracts purporting to assume some transcendent expressive capacity by casting off the word – so that the visual structure itself is seen to possess some magical intimacy with its referent, or to become its own referent – the structure generally seems characterised by its relationship with the enveloping three-dimensional void whose presence it implies.^{xiii} It is this encompassing and permeating space, and not the visual form 'pushed into shape' by it – as John Sharkey put it in his introduction to *Mindplay* (1971, 18) – which stands for the poetic object, specifically for that inexpressible union with the divine outlined earlier. The structures are rather representations of the processes of thought, prayer or supplicatory ritual by which the subject attempts some intimacy with or awareness of that state.

These two aspects of apophatic composition – the absorption of language into abstract visual motif, but also the orientation of the visual structure around a blank space – are evident in almost all of Houédard's typestracts. But there are nuances to be observed in the terms of their deployment. In some cases, for example, the structuring void seems to be enclosed or captured by the visual form, as in the piece 'Chakrometer' from *A Book of Chakras* (1967, n.pag [fig. 1]), which suggests a hollow cylindrical structure containing an emptiness. **Figure 1. Dom Sylvester Houédard. 'Chakrometer.' [1967]. From *A Book of Chakras*. All images are reproduced by kind permission of the Prinknash Abbey Trustees.** In other cases, the emptiness seems rather to envelop the design from without, as in this untitled work (fig. 2) from a later collection, *Like Contemplation* (1972, n.pag.). **Figure 2. [Cube Typestract]. 1972. From *Like Contemplation*. This and all subsequent images are reproduced with acknowledgements to Writers Forum.** A more significant distinction,

perhaps, is that some of the typestracts are granted a degree of conceptual clarity by an accompanying tag or annotation, as in the impression of ascetic awareness generated by the phrase ‘w/out knowing but to know you arnt’. Indeed, these linguistic tags occasionally specify the particular form of ritual or prayer evoked by the design, which therefore assumes more precise, diagrammatic values than we might expect. For better or worse, the design also generally takes on more exclusively theological or spiritual overtones.

Houédard’s ‘Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases....’ (fig. 3), for example, from *Tantric Poems Perhaps* (1967, n.pag), is one of many which pay homage to the ‘yantras’ or visual art-objects used in Tantric ritual. **Figure 3. ‘Visualisation of Idapingala Staircases with Mount Meru up the Middle.’ 1967. From *Tantric Poems Perhaps*.** According to Philip Rawson’s *The Art of Tantra* (1973), yantras are diagrams of locations on the body and the surface of the world assumed to contain the energy of a divine creation process. They thus function as ‘maps of the system, together with detailed instructions for working the mechanism’, providing information or cues regarding the forms of psychosomatic activity by which these points of energy could be engaged or interacted with, and by which subjective being could thus be merged with the creation process (Rawson, [1978] 2003, 14).^{xiii} This particular piece is a representation of energy channels called ‘nadīs’ located within the ‘subtle body’, the body as envisaged in a rarified, spiritually defined state aloof to empirical study. An equivalent image in Tantric art would indicate a series of psychosomatic states to be passed through by engaging particular points on those energy-channels called ‘chakras’, in order to cultivate greater and greater intimacy with the energy of creation (Rawson, [1978] 2003).^{xiv} Accepting the unavoidably new-age connotations of this terminology, the key point is that Houédard’s ‘staircases’ are not images of the creation process or the creator itself. Instead, they represent and solicit particular forms of mental and bodily activity undertaken in response to

it. As per the general apophatic impulse of the typestracts, the viewer's gaze is averted from the true object of the poem.

Returning to an earlier point, even in those cases where we cannot define that state of response or orientation using a linguistic annotation, the typestracts' visual forms still invite analogies with various theories of mental and spiritual epiphany. Often they feature recurring sets of motifs or shapes which gradually shift form or position, as in this untitled typestract (fig. 4) from *Like Contemplation* (1972, n.pag.). **Figure 4. [Screen Typestract]. 1972. From *Like Contemplation*.** Minimal gesture though it is, in the broader context of Houédard's theological writing the incremental shrinkage of these screens seems redolent with associations of Platonic metaphysics and Christian mysticism: the idea of reality as a projection of shadows, and the gradual renunciation of subjective sense as coextensive with some blossoming spiritual awareness.

The exclusively theological interpretations that tend to emerge from such 'close readings' offer some context, if not justification, for the dismissal of Houédard's work as eccentrically or fatuously transcendentalist: in spite of its emphasis on the inexpressibility of the divine, and the deep scholarship on which it is based. But the typestracts always also express the more wordly, secular dimensions of Houédard's poetics: its playful circumvention of the yearning towards transcendent expression in first-wave avant-garde art; its reformulation of the Sartrean relationship between being and néant; its expression of an interplay of different symbolic systems demanded by McLuhan's age of electric communication; and, which *is* clear from the examples just given, its openness to a range of global and non-orthodox spiritualities, developed in the context of the Second Vatican Council.

Bearing all this in mind, let us return, finally, to the opening distinction between concrete poetry as exemplified by Finlay's practice and Houédard's. It is often argued that by removing the foundational significance of language from the concrete poem, the quality which

made it something of its own time and place, rather than a repetition of experiments conducted half a century earlier, was also shorn away. It seems, however, both from an exploration of the term ‘coexistentialism’, and from the richness and scope of Houédard’s poetic practice during the 1960s-70s, that we should acknowledge the value and timeliness of this other, coexistentialist concrete poetics, and of Houédard’s contribution to late-twentieth-century poetry and art.

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ⁱ Finlay's comment is quoted in the entry on his work in the 1970 reference book *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*. The entry is anonymous but includes a biographical note by Edwin Morgan.

ⁱⁱ The tenets of intermedia practice which I have in mind here, and their ideological and political connotations, are evident in Dick Higgins's 1966 manifesto 'Intermedia':

The concept of the separation between media arose in the renaissance. The idea that a painting is made of paint on canvas or that a sculpture should not be painted seems characteristic of the kind of social thought – categorizing and dividing society into nobility with its various subdivisions, untitled gentry, artisans, serfs and landless workers – which we call the Feudal conception of the Great Chain of Being. This essentially mechanistic approach continued to be relevant throughout the first two industrial revolutions, just concluded, and into the present era of automation....

However, the social problems that characterize our time, as opposed to the political ones, no longer allow a compartmentalized approach. We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant ([1]).

ⁱⁱⁱ As regards critical consensus on Finlay's work, the influential critic of literary modernism Marjorie Perloff, for example, has written of it on several occasions, notably in 'From "Suprematism" to Language Game: The Blue and Brown Poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay' (2010). The long-standing critical support of art historian Stephen Bann has also been important in ensuring its reputation.

^{iv} This comment appears in Morgan's untitled biographical note on Houédard in the second edition of *Contemporary Poets of the English Language* (1975).

^v Houédard's delivered this lecture in two parts, at the Royal College of Art and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, on March 2 and May 12, 1964. The transcript quoted here is stored with the Edwin Morgan Papers at Glasgow University Library.

^{vi} See Houédard's reference to this period in his 1972 autobiographical note 'Chronobiography/ Autozoography', for example, in which he describes the theme of his dissertation as 'liberty in Sartre' (26).

^{vii} See for example Gomringer's 1956 statement 'Concrete Poetry', which defines the style as:

International-supra national. It is a significant characteristic of the existential necessity of concrete poetry that creations such as those brought together in this volume began to appear almost simultaneously in Europe and South America and that the attitude which made the creation and defense of such structures possible manifested itself here as it did there. (68)

^{viii} In his 'Eyear' lecture, for example, Houédard described concrete poetry as emerging 'partly [out of] the planetarisation effect of our global village culture as we move out of the 4th season of the industrial/mechanical age into the 5th season of the electronic & spaceage' (1964, n.pag).

^{ix} Though it also seems to owe something to Sartre's idea of the relationship between human consciousness and pure being: between being-for-itself and being-in-itself.

^x Rather than being explicitly dated, this letter is marked 'yom EOstre/Pasques/Pesach', a coded reference to Easter Sunday. 'Yom' is a Biblical Hebrew term often translated as 'day', 'Ēostre' a Germanic goddess from whose name the English word 'Easter' derives, and 'Pasques' and 'Pesach' Old French and Jewish terms for Easter and Passover respectively. The letter is also accompanied by poems dated around Easter 1963, and followed by another, dated '180463' – seemingly by Themerson, upon receipt – which begins 'My dear moncher/ I wrote as you niticed [sic.] on EASTER DAY'. The first letter must also date from 1963 then, when Easter Sunday fell on April 14.

^{xi} The term ‘apophasis’ appeals because of its allusions both to apophatic theology – the idea that the nature of God can only be indicated by rejecting of all positive descriptions of him – and to literary and rhetorical contexts, in which it would function as a form of irony, or conscious reference through conspicuous non-reference.

^{xii} This may remind us of the relationship between typographic form and visual space outlined in Mallarmé’s essay ‘Crisis in Poetry’ (1896), which describes printed language as ‘a fragmentary disposition with alternations and oppositions, all working towards the total rhythm of the white spaces, which would be the poem silenced; but it is translated to some extent by each pendent’ (232).

^{xiii} Rawson describes the Tantric creation process based primarily on Hindu rather than Buddhist variants of Tantra. According to Tantric mythology, he states, the entire ‘universe of phenomena’ ([1978] 2003, 14) is generated by:

[t]he active play of a female creative principle, the Goddess of many forms, sexually penetrated by an invisible, indescribable, seminal male. In ultimate fact He has generated Her for his own enjoyment. And the play, because it is analogous to the activity of sexual intercourse, is pleasurable to her (9-10).

As noted, the energy of this creation process is concentrated at particular points in the body and world, so that the perceptible universe has a ‘subtle four-dimensional skeleton of channels’ (14). Thus, while the creation process is impalpable to subjective consciousness, Tantric practice can familiarise or merge subjective being with the energy of creation through a kind of interaction with these points of energy called ‘sādhana’: ‘i.e. psychosomatic effort, assimilating his own body to higher and higher levels of cosmic body-pattern. In the end he may become identical with the original double-sexed deity, which is involved, without

beginning or end, in blissful intercourse with itself' (14). Much sādhanā involves mimicking the creation process, occasionally through ritual sex.

^{xiv} These are ideas common within the aspect of Tantric ritual defined as Yoga. Houédard's terms 'ida' and 'pingala' refer to two of the nadīs within the subtle body, which spiral upwards from left and right-hand positions around a central spinal nadī or 'suṣumna'. All the nadīs have associative qualities and locations, ida connected to femininity, the moon and the Ganges, pingala to masculinity, the sun and the Yamuna river, and suṣumna to the central point of the universe in Tantric mythology, the sacred, five-peaked Mount Meru: hence Houédard's titular reference (Rawson, [1978] 2003 [excluding references to Houédard's work]).